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SUBJECT: DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER NGUYEN TAN DUNG: STRONG ROOTS IN THE  
MEKONG DELTA

REF: Hanoi 767

¶1. (SBU) During a visit to the Mekong Delta province of Kien Giang April 6-7, the Consul General discussed with local officials Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, who spent his formative years in the province. According to Kien Giang People's Committee Chairman Bui Ngoc Suong, Dung was born in neighboring Ca Mau Province in November 1949. He later moved with his family to Kien Giang. Dung's father was a senior National Liberation Front (NLF or, Viet Cong) leader, who was killed in the war when Dung was young. Dung subsequently joined the insurgency himself, Suong said. (Dung's public records indicate that Dung joined the People's Army in 1961 when he would have been 12 or 13 years old. He joined the Communist Party in 1967.)

¶2. (SBU) According to the Kien Giang chairman, Dung served as an NLF corpsman, and later led a surgery unit in Kien Giang during the war. He reportedly operated in the U Minh forest, which used to be an NLF stronghold. In 1981, after 20 years of military service, Dung was discharged as a Major and moved to Hanoi to continue his education at the Party's Nguyen Ai Quoc Political Academy where he earned a bachelors degree in law and a diploma of advanced studies in political science. (Note: Nguyen Ai Quoc is one Ho Chi Minh's previous nommes de guerre. End Note.)

¶3. (SBU) Upon graduation from the Hanoi Party academy, Dung was appointed Deputy Head of the Kien Giang Party Committee's Personnel and Organization Board. He rapidly rose through the Party ranks in the province. Within a decade he was appointed Party secretary. He concurrently served as a member of the Party's Committee of the 9th Military Region. Dung was elected a member of the Party's Central Committee at the 6th national Party Congress in 1986. At the end of 1994, he was transferred to Hanoi to be Deputy Minister of the Interior (later was renamed the Ministry of Public Security).

¶4. (SBU) Kien Giang officials say that Dung remains a son of the soil. He travels frequently to Kien Giang and has secured political appointments for many Kien Giang and other contacts in the Mekong Delta in Hanoi. For example, a reliable contact in Kien Giang told us that Minister of Public Security and Politburo member Le Hong Anh is a protege of Dung; Dung helped Anh become his successor as Party secretary in Kien Giang and later brought Anh to Hanoi. Dung also helped appoint former vice chairman of the Kien Giang People's Committee Huynh Vinh Ai to become the vice chairman of the National Sports and Gymnastics Committee (a vice minister-equivalent position). Ai reportedly is responsible for coordinating a GVN initiative to legalize certain forms of sports betting. Dung also brought then-director of the Kien Health Department Tran Chi Liem to Hanoi. Liem now is Standing Vice Minister of Health.

Ties of Blood to the Right and Left?

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¶5. (SBU) According to another contact in the Mekong Delta, Dung's father died while participating in a planning meeting with then-insurgency leaders Le Duc Anh and Vo Van Kiet when they were attacked by either U.S. or ARVN artillery fire. The contact says that Anh and Kiet believed they had a blood debt. Both supported Dung's political career although the two are rivals from the opposite ends of the political spectrum within the Party. (Anh, a political conservative, served as President from 1992 to 1997, although contacts say that he remains highly influential behind the scenes. Kiet, a former Prime Minister, is the leading figure in the Party's reform camp.)

¶6. (SBU) Comment: Very proud of their native son, Kien Giang provincial officials revel at the likelihood of his ascension to Prime Minister (reftel) following the 10th National Party Congress, and infer that Kien Giang might benefit from increased GVN investment and financing of provincial projects. However, they avoided discussing his political orientation. Other HCMC contacts say that Dung is a direct, no-nonsense decision-maker who is not afraid of taking risks. For example, they report that he was one of the first senior Party leaders to send his children to a university in the United States. Moreover, his wartime pedigree and relationships with both Le Duc Anh and former Prime Minister Kiet may allow him to balance competing pressures from the conservative and reform wings of the Party.

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